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ABSTRACT

In this speech, the process problems facing school boards are examined, and techniques for overcoming these problems are suggested. According to the authors, a school board is a collection of diverse individuals characterized by (1) a lack of criteria to define excellence, (2) a lack of specific goals to focus its work on, (3) a lack of broad policies to define its stance on critical issues, (4) little or no knowledge of employee motivation, (5) ineffective board committees, (6) mutual distrust, (7) time wasting inefficiency, and (8) a lack of properly trained people for the job. To remedy these problems, the author proposes the implementation of organizational development principles. As an alternative, he suggests that traditional boards be replaced by professional boards appointed by State departments of education. (JF)

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BOARD AND SUPERINTENDENT: BUILDING THE EFFECTIVE TEAM*

Richard Kammann

I would like to take as my point of departure the proposition that local school boards must either take the responsibility and leadership to advance our educational system with equality and pluralism, or else local control of education will not survive, and should not survive.

Let us begin by considering some of the major problems which confront our society today: an increasing rate of violent crime which is already higher in America than in any other country: prejudice, segregation and racism; the rapid spread of new and diverse mind-bending drugs: an upward spiral of pollution and a downward spiral of natural resources: indices of substandard mental and physical health. It is only through the will of the people that we will solve these problems; and only through education that that will will emerge.

If board members see too little connection between these social problems and the schools they run, they are at least aware of many related problems which must be solved in the educational arena. We know, for example, that the cost of education cannot continue to rise at its present rate; state funding of education can only postpone briefly our collision with the ceiling of money resources. We will have to find cheaper ways to educate our children.

At the same time we realize reluctantly through the eyes of our critics that we must revitalize the spirit of the schools to match the needs of our times. I doubt that schools are absolutely worse today than they have been in the past, although I think they have become too big, too remote from the family, and too ritualized. But, it is our new knowledge of how much better we could be doing that really justifies Silberman's challenge in Crisis in the Classroom.

To these primary concerns we can add a whole list of other significant problems: integration; bussing and anti-bussing; racial fights, black studies; sexism in our textbooks and courses: students' rights, teachers' rights, student councils who want to be heard: parents who want accountability; parents who want alternative and open styles of education, and now the need for equality of education in rich and poor school districts.

School board members often resent the fact that the "big" educational decisions seem to come from the state capitals or from the courts. But have local school boards really committed themselves to improving the lot of the poor, the powerless and the disadvantaged? Especially where this would take regional coordination?

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These then are the pressing needs and substantive educational problems of our times. The question before us is whether we can build effective board teams to meet these needs. I think that a close examination of the process problems which plague many or most school boards will give us a better idea of what we would have to do to become truly effective.

Before we consider the process problems which come from within the board meeting room, let me sketch a brief picture of a truly effective management team as a basis for comparison. This imaginary team is a management task force consisting of different specialists who have all been in the same business for several years. These men are excited about their project and about the prospects of working together. They start off respecting each other. They immediately establish a set of goals, and then they determine the intermediate objectives. They divide themselves up into ad hoc committees to gather information and conduct studies between meetings. No one is afraid to bring up a wild idea and no one is wounded if it gets shot down. No one is afraid to challenge or criticize the suggestion of another person for fear it will hurt his feelings. No one persists in defending an idea the group has shelved. The team continues to evolve its objectives and its plans for meeting them. Much information is gathered from unexpected sources as a result of diligent searching and investigation. All the key people who will have to participate in executing the final plan are kept informed and encouraged to feed information and ideas into the team's efforts. Above all, no member of the team is interested in fostering his own ego through games of upmanship or currying of favor. In the end a truly excellent plan emerges and is put into action without delay or resistance.

Now against this somewhat idealistic model, let us examine together the process problems which keep boards of education from achieving this same level of excellence.

1. Lack of Criteria of Evaluation

It is a fundamental slogan that "school board members should not run the schools but should see that they are well run." In actuality this slogan is often used as an excuse to maintain an artificial harmony with the Superintendent by blocking embarassing questions.

How can school board members see that the schools are well run if they have no criteria for performance, not for the children, not for the teachers, and not for the administrators? Accountability is beginning to look like the weather; everybody talks about it but nobody does anything about it.

I would be the last person to propose the standardized tests should be taken at face value. But it seems incredible to me that, while most school systems routinely give such tests, all machine-scored and summarized any way you want by the test publisher, the board does not even look at the results.

A better approach, of course, would be for the school board to define what it meant by good education, and then insist that measures be developed to fit their own goals.

2. Lack of Specific Board Goals

The typical school board is almost 100% reactive. It sits around and waits for something to happen. The Superintendent runs through his agenda -- a change in the curriculum, a new ruling from the state, a demand from the student council -- and then the board decides what to do. I wonder how many people here are members of a board which has set up specific objectives to be achieved this school year AND the board is actually working on them.

3. Ineffectual Board Policies

A school board would do both the Superintendent and the public a big favor if it set down its broad policies in black and white so everyone knew what it was trying to do. It would also save itself from converting every trivial question into a debate among amateur philosophers.

4. Lack of Knowledge about Education

According to The Little Red Schoolbook, "Many (school board members), if not most of them, know nothing at all about education apart from what they can vaguely remember of their own schooldays." This blunt statement is painfully true. One would think that lay schoolboard members would conscientiously read everything they could get on education but many of them have not read a single book and very few magazine articles.

They will not hesitate, however, to debate and decide on tracking, team teaching, the open classroom, learning centers, performance contracting, new courses in the curriculum, and which teachers, principals and administrators shall be re-hired or given tenure.

The more devastating problem, however, is that school boards are incapable of taking any positive leadership in changing the educational system. As Dr. Dwight Allen of the University of Massachusetts has put it, what school board would dare to throw out a high school course in geometry if it is supposedly required for college entrance?

5. Remoteness and Lack of Knowledge about Human Motivation

There is now an extensive body of literature on what features of a job give employees the incentive to achieve excellence. Taking a cue from Herzberg, for example, employees are not really motivated by salary, benefits, days off, hours, after-school meetings, bulletin boards and everything that comes up in negotiations. What really affects their performance are matters of professional respect, autonomy to carry out the job, understanding the goals of the system, appreciation for a job truly well done, and everything else that makes the job an honest expression of human ingenuity.

What this means is that the control of organizations through a hierarchical bureaucracy is no longer a viable managerial style, and it is rapidly going out of style in businesses. However, school boards continue to be remote from the teachers they govern, remote from the parents they serve, and especially remote from the children who are their primary charge.

6. Ineffective Board Committees

It would seem to be only common sense that a board should divide itself into standing committees in order to spread the workload. In practice, however, standing committees add more drag than thrust to the board's progress. They usually have no written responsibilities, and if they do there is nothing to compel them to do the work implied. Furthermore, any other board member can undo a committee's work by demanding a complete re-hash of all the information and discussions.

But the real downfall of standing committees is that they are appointed by the board president and thus fail to take into account the interests and talents of the members. In many cases the president uses the committee assignments to bestow power and to deny power. Further resentment emerges from the prestige and influence that committee chairmen may have even when they have not done any real homework.

7. Distrust on the Board

The committee system is only one basis for distrust among board members. Many of them arrive on the scene with a dispute with the existing board. New board members expect to have a full voice immediately, while old board members may expect them to listen and learn. The new members may be completely unaware of tough problems previously solved or of the personal loyalties of the old board members to the administration. Finally, there may be vast differences in actual competence among the members.

Lacking goal oriented projects to work on together, the board members are free to drift into an openly split board. You may have heard that simply dividing children into groups on the basis of blue eyes or brown eyes can rapidly produce tightly-knit groups with stereotypes, suspicion, and hostility toward each other. Similar demonstrations have been done with adults. In an experiment by Jaap Rabbie, half of the people in a group of strangers were given red name tages, half green name tags; ten minutes later a sense of fear, defensiveness and distrust had already developed between the "reds" and the "greens".

The opposite of a split board is one based on a culture of false harmony. These are the fraternity type boards. For the sake of harmony nobody asks any questions or offers any alternative ideas. There is no probing of assumptions, critical-thinking, or serious problem solving. Instead there is reminiscing, gossip, and small talk. Even with the unfortunate polarization, I will take the split board over the do-nothing social club any day. What is needed is a climate of open debate in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

8. Distrust between Board and Superintendent

The superintendent has a vested interest in not telling the truth. If there is a problem in his system, the board may take it out on him or make a public issue out of it. As a trained professional he may find it hard to explain new educational approaches to laymen.

The board members on the other hand may be suspicious of a snowjob or of covering up. The more distrustful their attitude, the more the superintendent is inclined to gloss over his real problems and goals, and the more likely he is to get caught eventually.

Until the board demonstrates its capacity to set progressive and responsive policies, the Superintendents job will contain frustration, uncertainty, and overwork.

9. Sheer Time-Wasting Inefficiency

Because boards are ultimately responsible for what happens in the school system, they take it very seriously if anything goes wrong. Consequently the superintendent is forced to get their approval on every minor change or development. This leads to that horrendous obstacle to major progress, the superintendent's agenda. This agenda is the crux of the board culture which keeps it reactive rather than goal-oriented. It also tricks the board members into debating every minor administrative question. This is the time when someone should say, "The school board should not run the schools...".

If the board does not use a written agenda, the length of discussion on a topic is directly proportional to how early it is brought up in the evening. If the board has a written agenda, the discussion is inversely proportional to the complexity of the topic. Jack Witkowsky, in an article in last November's Saturday Review, described a meeting of the Chicago Board of Education in which the Superintendent announced a desperate need to raise $21 million just to keep the existing programs going. The board debated this item 15 minutes, and then debated the proposed name of a particular community school for over three hours.

10. Lack of Board Member Orientation and Training

The complexities of education and management notwithstanding, every board member seems to feel he is fully qualified for the job by the fact that he was elected or appointed to it.

Only a few state associations offer an intensive workshop in boardmanship, and only a small percent of board members attend them. Those that do often find it hard to communicate what they have learned to the know-it-alls who stayed home.

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In summary, a school board is likely to be a collection of diverse individuals with no criteria to define excellence, no specific goals to focus its work upon, no broad policies to define its stance on critical issues, little or no knowledge of educational issues and options, little knowledge of employee motivation, ineffective board committees, distrust of each other and the superintendent, time wasting inefficiency, and no training for the job. Perhaps few boards have all these problems, but even fewer boards have none of them.

If a camel is a horse designed by a committee, then the school board must be a committee designed by a camel. Surely the time-consuming futility which encumbers so many school boards must prevent the candidacy of many highly-qualified goal-oriented citizens. As a result, school boards may get more than their share of members with time on their hands and an ego-trip on their minds.

It is, then, these school boards to which we turn for the leadership to solve the large substantive problems of schooling in our country, and to help solve the larger social problems of the present and future.

It is tempting to stop and balance the discussion by mentioning the devotion of many fine citizens to their boards, to recognize the achievements of the past, to consider the corrective forces which keep school boards working along at some level. But time does not permit such an indulgence.

It would make no sense to dwell on our practical problems and limitations if it were not possible to point to models of managerial excellence which school boards could actually achieve. To simplify this part of the discussion I shall confine my comments to a type of management analysis and improvement called organization development or "OD."

Organization development starts with the insight that you don't get an effective organization unless you work on it, unless you develop it systematically. Furthermore, you have to recognize that the key to excellence is the mobilization of the creative capacities of all the people involved.

To understand how to release this creative potential we must understand in what ways the existing job situation constrains people, limits them, and even produces negative behavior such as apathy or jealousy. According to OD, people work in an organizational culture or climate which determines how they perceive their role in the overall effort. In describing the process problems which defeat or debilitate many school boards, I have been illustrating just such an organizational culture. In short, board members understand it as their role to sit around and debate the pros and cons of every item on the superintendent's agenda.

Let us consider for a moment that teachers also work in an organizational culture. Once you are defined as a 7th grade English teacher you inherit a whole baggage of past customs and practices. Your job is defined and confined by the activities you must carry out rather than by the results you achieve. The 7th grade English curriculum must be "covered" no matter how many kids aren't getting it. Of course these traditional role features can give the teacher a crutch, and make the job easier if not more significant. The job is still further constrained by the idiosyncracies of the principal who might be an audio-visual bug but may view field trips as a form of goofing off. Furthermore, it may be "understood" by the other 7th grade teachers that the kids in the lowest track need fifth-grade materials to work with. This, then is your organizational "culture". You can't fight it because you are hardly aware of it: it's the way things are.

The function of organization development is to release the individual from narrow concerns and out of date duties, and put him in touch with the bigger enterprise. Paraphrased from Warren Bennis, the goals of OD are:

1. To create an open, problem solving climate throughout an organization
2. To replace the authority of status or role with the authority of knowledge and competence
3. To locate decision making and problem solving responsibilities as closely as possible to the people who know the situation
4. To build trust among the individuals and groups that make up the organization.
5. To replace interpersonal competition with issue oriented, goal oriented debate designed to foster collaboration.
6. To develop a system which rewards people when they make real contributions to the achievement of the organization
7. To increase each person's sense of ownership of the organization through participation in defining its goals and objectives
8. To define excellence in terms of the achievement of relevant objectives rather than in terms of past practices and customs
9. To allow the people to develop more self-control and more self-direction as contributing members of the evolving system.

Robert Blake and Jane Mouton give us a somewhat simpler way to understand and remember the purposes of organization development. Blake and Mouton have developed what they call the managerial grid: along one axis you have concern for organizational goals and along the other axis, concern for the development of people. The purpose of Grid OD is to mesh these two concerns by getting the people to become fully involved in the pursuit of meaningful goals and excellent achievement. This in turn gives the people an increased commitment and sense of satisfaction.

The Blake-Mouton grid allows us to identify a number of different ineffective managerial styles: the completely laissez faire approach where all work of the organization is dictated by traditional roles and decisions are made in the honor of history; the middle-of-the-road compromise approach; the happy-family syndrome in which it is a sin for anyone to have a dissenting point of view; the autocratic approach in which the top team dictates every activity for goals known only to itself.

Effective teamwork requires that all the members come to see themselves as significant contributors to a truly important and dynamic human enterprise. Differences of opinion, disagreement and conflict are all brought out in the open not just for the sake of steam letting, but for constant adaptation and revitalization, and for getting as many inputs as possible into the problem solving process.

Now a school board which assimilated these concepts would be one which recognized its great, long-range responsibilities, and worked toward solving them by encouraging authentic human relationships throughout the school system. By authentic human relationships I mean those that are open, honest, and fair minded. Non-authentic relationships occur when there is false harmony, lack of candor, stereotyping of groups or individual, distrust, no questioning of why things are done the way they are, in-group/out-group relationships, factionalism, plotting and secrecy.

Such a school board would not be emotionally split even though it would contain open differences of opinion. It would throw out standing committees and focus its energies, perhaps with ad hoc committees, on accomplishing specific goals which derive from larger social concern. Its purpose would be to give the schools direction through broad policies. It would seek the representation of views from the children, the parents, and the teachers. It would be in and out of the classrooms. Its own goal progress would be fully open to the community through its meetings, news reports, policy manuals, and task force reports. I am proud to say that my own school board conducts it planning or caucus sessions under public observation.

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But before we go any further in defining this new culture of the school board, what is the likelihood we will see it come into being? Here I am stopped dead in my tracks. I try to visualize a typical board agreeing that it was badly in need of management training, and standing up to the taxpayers to say so. I try to visualize board members putting aside the hundreds of items on the superintendent's agenda and taking themselves off to workshops, seminars, training exercises, or having process consultants sit with them in their board meetings, I try to visualize a school board which embarks on this program and is able to sustain after two years of new replacements. Impossible, no; improbable, yes.

I must stop here to tell you the sad story of a school district which did set out to get management training, and in fact utilized the help of an organization development team. The Board, the administration and the teachers were all involved in a series of workshops, and in fairly short-order some new and exciting things began to happen in their school district. Their middle school, for example, was built on an imaginative use of schools within a school, and the different programs were as diverse as the staff teams that ran them. However, word got out to the public that one part of the management effort included "sensitivity training" which sounded too much like "encounter groups" and ultimately too much like an emotional junket. Consequently, some uptight school board members were elected on an anti-OD campaign platform and the program came to a grinding halt. Unfortunately, the special service teachers, by which I mean those in shop, music, art, and physical education, never got a chance to participate in the program and resentment began to develop between them and the academic teacher teams. But by this time, the problem solving culture that had begun to emerge was already disappearing and nothing was done. The new board members have been totally disruptive, the superintendent is under constant pressure, and some of the original board members are too discouraged to go on.

Now even if we avoided the controversial use of "sensitivity training" which is hardly a subversive or radical activity itself, my question is, will the people who appoint or elect school boards understand and tolerate a serious effort at management development.

I can think of three specific things which could be done to improve the situation immediately:

1. That State should set up management training courses for Boardmen and Superintendents and make these courses either mandatory, or else highly attractive through other incentives. These courses might be administered by a County Superintendent's office or by the State Association of School Boards where such an Association is strong and is established by law.

2. The State, perhaps through the County Superintendent's office, could set up effective evaluation teams for independent and objective assessments of the district's progress toward its own goals. Such reports should make positive recommendations for improved effectiveness, and a summary of these recommendations should be made available to the public.

3. The Board President, after acquainting himself with some of the basic concepts of effective administration, should bring his own leadership to bear to reverse those process problems which hamper his board.

I can only say this. That if the local school boards don't do something fast to improve the contribution of education to the needs of the people in our society, then it must pass out of existence.

(NOTE: THIS MAY NOT BE THE END OF THE SPEECH. I AM CONSIDERING A BRIEF SECTION DESCRIBING AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE LOCAL SCHOOL BOARD!)

I would like to draw this issue somewhat more sharply by proposing an alternative to the district board which might do the job more effectively.

I am going to make a paradoxical argument. The way to get more real local control and lay participation is to move toward a more professional type of school board, and one which would require, in many cases, more centralization. More accurately, I shall propose a professional board at the regional level, and a unit school operating board for each individual school.

Imagine a full-time paid board of education responsible for approximately 50 schools or 30,000 children. This board would consist of a mix of highly qualified people, presumably appointed by the State Department of Education. The new board might consist of a business manager, a scientist, an artist, a union man, a doctor or nurse, a sociologist or social worker, a clinical psychologist, and two or three educators. It would have a reasonable representation of races, ethnic groups and both sexes.

I shall refer to this new management team as the Regional Schools Council. As a trained management board, the Council would recognize two major responsibilities: first, to foster that personal participation through authentic relationships which releases the creative potential in teachers, children, and parents, and second to foster a broadly-conceived excellence in education.

In respect to the "people" question, the Council would have in its charter the requirement to set up processes which ensure local involvement and lay participation in the running of the schools. Thus, the Council would likely create a student-parent-teacher operating board for each school. This unit school operating board would define the philosophy and aims of the school, would evaluate the progress of the schools, and would decide how its operating monies shall be spent. These monies would be essentially based on a per-pupil allocation of funds to be spent for space rental, textbooks, equipment, supplies, field trips, and to some extent the teacher-pupil ratio, but it would not decide upon teacher salary.

In some cases the Council might throw open the creation of schools to petition by groups of parents who would present a statement of the school's purpose, its consititution and set of operating by-laws.

I must inject here a challenge to the logic of local control as it now exists. One argument is that local control reduces the school system to a size which is comprehensible and is responsive to the wishes of the families it serves. In fact, most school boards, and the schools they operate, are too remote and too impersonal to achieve this goal.

Second, it is often assumed in defending local control that the families in one community are all like each other in their needs and values, but are different from those in neighboring school districts. In fact, there is much more diversity of values and needs within the typical school district than between two adjacent ones, and this diversity is duplicated from district to district. This statement may even hold fairly well for districts which are far apart, have different levels of wealth, and different racial or ethnic compositions.

Finally, now that the local property tax has been diagnosed as having terminal cancer, the district school board is no longer needed to resolve the conflict between tax resources and educational aspirations.

So we are frée to move a substantial portion of the decision-making to the level of the individual school, hopefully, a small school.

Now, what does educational excellence mean to the Regional Schools Council? Certainly it does not mean a narrow concept of accountability deriving from the convenient availability of certain standardized achievement tests. Such an approach would lead to the dictation of both curriculum and the schooling process, and would thus subvert the pluralism of educational goals created through the unit school operating board.

For the Council, excellence in education would mean the establishment of priorities for achieving a sane society. It would mean attention to those contemporary and future social problems we have mentioned before. Thus, the Council would establish broad policies of operation which would apply throughout the schools of the region.

The Council would recognize what too many school boards do not: that every child is part of the future social environment of every other child. It would go beyond the minimum standards of equal educational opportunity required by the laws, and would establish a philosophy which is designed to meet the special needs of diverse children and adults.

The Council would establish the ground rules for open access to each school, for the education of children who are handicapped, disadvantaged, or live in disturbing home environments, for vocational training opportunities, for pre-school education, for community colleges, for adult education and for the skill and information networks described by Illich and Reimer. In short, the Council would be highly informed about the needs of our times and about the insights from the behavioral sciences which shed light on meeting these needs.

The Council will have met one of its educational objectives in creating the family-oriented school, for the growing child should not be asked to live in two segregated worlds, one of the home, another of the school.

Through its paid staff, the Council would provide evaluation guidance for the unit school board to assess its progress towards its own goals. Since I have brought up evaluation and, by implication, accountability, I would like to make a brief but important sidepoint. Objective evaluation has no value if (1) it is destructive of the authentic human relationships which foster personal development, or (2) it does not yield positive recommendations as to the courses of action required to make an improvement.

Now a footnote about the role of the teacher under the Regional Schools Council. First, the professional council would negotiate about those common concerns expressed through the regional teachers' association, including salary schedules and benefits; it would defer purely local school problems to the unit school board until and unless that board should be unable to resolve them.

Teacher tenure would be closely defined to refer to personal honesty and academic freedom, but the ability of the Regional Council to dismiss a teacher for incompetence or ineffectiveness would be much broader than it is now. This is possible because the teachers would be in closer relation to their families, and because the Regional Council would not be subject to the vicissitudes of local politics which have threatened teachers in the past.

The unit school operating board could ask for a teacher's removal and present its case; the Council would then decide upon transfer, retraining, or dismissal.

Certainly this brief sketch of the Regional Schools Council has not begun to answer all the questions which must be asked. What I hope I have done is to create a concept of educational leadership against which the local school board can assess its claims to legitimacy and power.